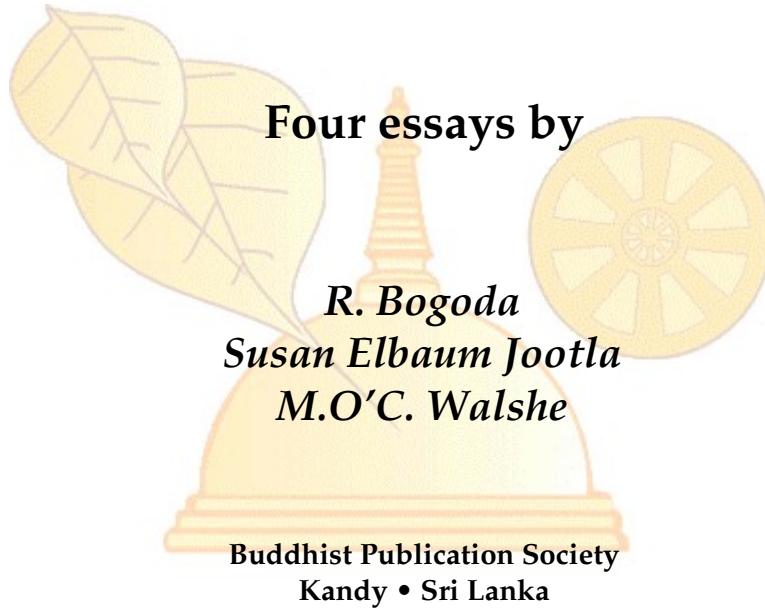


The Buddhist Layman



Four essays by

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Right Livelihood: The Noble Eightfold Path in the Working Life

by Susan Elbaum Jootla

The question of correct livelihood is of great importance for any practicing lay Buddhist. So also to the many meditators once they have done enough meditation courses, and work on their own, to realize that they must live a Dhamma life. Just what is Right Livelihood—how broad is the category of trades a disciple of the Buddha cannot ply? And how can one best work so that he is developing the other seven Path factors while earning a living? Is work a total waste—just a means to the end of supporting oneself in order to meditate? Or can one's job be used in a more constructive way so that it brings some direct benefit to those around us as well? These and many other related issues come to the mind of anyone who finds himself in the position of the Buddha's teachings, and to a large extent each of us has to determine for himself the details of how to work out the livelihood aspects of his life. In this essay an attempt is made simply to outline how we can try to use the Noble Eightfold Path in relation to our work—whether it is in an office or a factory, in the city or country, whether it is indoors or outdoors, white collar or blue collar or neither. If the meditator succeeds in applying *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *pañña* (wisdom), the three aspects of the Path, at work as well as in all other life situations, he will be growing in Dhamma even during the part of the day that is apparently devoted to non-Dhamma work, and at the same time he will be doing his job well and sharing his peace of mind and *mettā* (loving-kindness) with those his livelihood brings him into contact with.

Monks, these five trades ought not to be plied by a lay-disciple... Trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in spirits [intoxicants] and trade in poison.

Gradual Sayings III, p. 153. (AN 5.177)

And what, monks, is wrong mode of livelihood? Trickery, cajolery, insinuating, dissembling, rapacity for gain upon gain... And what, monks, is the right side of merit that ripens unto cleaving to a new birth? Herein monks, an ariyan disciple, by getting rid of wrong livelihood, earns his living by a right mode of living...

Middle Length Sayings III, pp. 118–19.

The fields of livelihood which the Buddha prohibited to his lay followers, as listed in the initial quotation above, are limited to those in which the disciple would be directly, on his own responsibility, involved in breaking one or more of the Five Precepts, which are the very basic moral rules for the Buddhist layman. Anyone who is attempting to develop morality, concentration, and wisdom, to grow in compassion and insight, cannot deal in weapons of any sort, at any level of the business because by doing so he would be involving himself in causing harm or injury to others for his own monetary gain. These days the probability of trading in human beings as slaves or for prostitution is limited, but certainly any job with such overtones is to be avoided. Breeding animals for slaughter as meat or for other uses that may be made of the carcasses is not allowed because this obviously implies breaking the First Precept: I shall abstain from killing. Working on someone else's beef ranch or selling packaged meat is acceptable as there is no responsibility for killing involved. Similarly, anyone trying to follow

the teachings of the Buddha should avoid hunting and fishing, nor can he be an exterminator of animals. Dealing in alcohol or intoxicating drugs would be making oneself directly responsible for encouraging others to break the Fifth Precept: I shall abstain from all intoxicants. While by no means everyone we meet is trying to keep these precepts, still, to help others directly in breaking any of them is certainly wrong livelihood. If we manufacture, deal in, or use insecticides or other kinds of poisons in our work, we are engaging to some degree in wrong livelihood because here, too, we are breaking the First Precept and directly encouraging others to do so as well. However, the motivation behind the use of such material has a great deal to do with the depth of the kamma being created. A doctor rightly gives drugs which are harmful to bacteria and viruses, not because he hates the “bugs,” but in order to help cure the human being. Here the good more than balances the bad. But if we go about applying poison to rat-holes and cockroaches’ hideouts with anger or aversion toward the pests, we would be generating considerably strong bad kamma.

But these five are the only ways of earning a living which are to be strictly avoided by one who is walking on the Path. Other fields of endeavour may seem trivial to the meditator investigating the job market, or they may appear to be just helping others to create more *taṇhā* (craving), or they may involve some indirect responsibility in wrong speech or action—but we must find our work within the context of the society from which we come, and within the framework of available job opportunities. It is not possible first to go about setting up the ideal Dhamma community and then find work within it; so we must live in the society and serve its members to the best of our ability. Someone who finds Dhamma in middle age and is settled into a career with little reasonable possibility of shifting to one more strictly in accord with Right Livelihood can—and must—practice Dhamma as it is possible within his context. For example, only rarely does an army officer serve in combat—the rest of the time there is ample scope for him to work wisely, according to *pañña*, in a detached way, giving the necessary commands without being overly harsh. There are a substantial number of police officers in Rajasthan doing vipassanā meditation who already are feeling the benefits of meditation in preserving law and order and dealing with criminals and the general public with little anger. Even people whose livelihood is solely dependent on hunting or fishing can at least develop *dāna* (liberality) and other virtues—as Burmese fishermen do—even if it is impossible for them to give up an incorrect mode of earning a living. After all, an important reason for which serious Buddhists become monks is that “the householder’s life is full of dust,” and few positions for lay livelihood can allow one to be completely pure. Due to the interdependence of all phases of society and today’s complex economic structures, it is very difficult to live as a layman and keep the perfect *sīla* the meditator strives for—a farmer has to use insecticides, public health workers kill mosquitoes and their larvae, a truck driver may sometimes have to transport arms or poison. Often one is in a position of having to exaggerate one’s statements or omit disadvantageous facts, even if one does not like it. So we must earn our livelihood as we have been trained, and as we find a position for ourselves in society while constantly making an effort to grow in Dhamma.

However, if we let the Dhamma slide and allow our daily routine work to take over and become the thing of paramount importance, then we have lost track of the goal we set for ourselves in being dedicated followers of the Buddha, and especially serious vipassanā meditators. One cannot use Dhamma for one’s increased mundane profit and continue to grow in *pañña* (wisdom) at the same time because then desire for gain (which is *taṇhā*) will be the root of one’s very Dhamma practice and a complete distortion of the real purpose of Dhamma—the elimination of craving (*taṇhā*) and so of suffering (*dukkha*). Occupational work is a means to keep alive and to support one’s dependents so that one can grow in Dhamma. Trying to use the Dhamma to help one achieve more at work, and ignoring the Noble Eightfold Path, or getting so

involved in business that one cannot even sit for meditation an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening is making a farce of Dhamma—perhaps keeping the form but surely losing the essence of the Buddha’s teaching. This is the way of *dukkha*, productive of suffering. To alleviate *dukkha* one must live by the Eightfold Path, earning one’s livelihood within its context, trying to practice *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *pañña*—morality, concentration, and wisdom—at the workplace as well as while formally sitting in meditation.

Once we have found a suitable job, the more long range task begins—applying the Buddha’s teachings at work. If we can keep *sīla* only during meditation courses what serious benefit have we gained from such training periods? If we lose all our mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom when we are confronted with the vibrations of a big city or the workplace, where is our wisdom? To grow in Dhamma we have to try constantly to apply the whole of the Noble Eightfold Path in all life’s circumstances, and some of the more challenging situations we will come across are very likely to be those we meet during working hours. Jobs are particularly important occasions to keep carefully to the Path for a number of reasons: (1) usually we do not have the support of the Sangha while at work and so are completely on our own; (2) work tends to arouse all previous thought associations and our deep-seated conditionings of greed, competition, and aversion; (3) so many of our waking hours are inevitably involved in simply earning a living. Yet if we rightly apply the Path factors on the job, we are still assured of moving toward success in the supramundane field, and we are quite apt to find that these factors enable us to do well in our chosen mundane work as well.

Let us first examine the relationship at work between the three *sīla* factors of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Right Livelihood was outlined in the first quotation from the Buddha. But Right Livelihood will not be really pure unless it includes Right Speech and Right Action as well. We have to strive with determination to keep all the Five Precepts while we work at a job, as well as for the rest of the time. The forms of wrong speech and wrong action to be avoided are all those in which lying, backbiting, or harming of others would be involved. If we are honest in our speech and actions, our employers will certainly be pleased with our work and we will be growing in Dhamma by confronting our mind’s opposing tendencies; we will note when the mind tries to find the easy way out or to blame others for our own errors. If we are running our own business, we must be scrupulously honest in our dealings with our customers and avoid all “trickery, cajolery... dissembling.” We can make a reasonable profit for services we perform of bringing our commodity to the consumer, but we must not let ourselves get caught up in the businessman’s perpetual tendency toward “rapacity for gain upon gain.” The merchant plays an important role and function in the community, but the meditator-businessman must always keep in mind that his job is to serve the society and provide for the needs of his family—not to make the maximum amount of money with the least effort as he might previously have perceived it.

Whatever our work situation is—in an office, factory, or shop—we will always feel the benefits of keeping *sīla*. If we do not indulge in gossip or slander—“office or academic politics”—but keep clearly to the side of right and honesty in every situation that arises with other workers or our employers, we will find that we are less often at the receiving end of other people’s anger. In fact, if we are really able to keep on the Path at work, we may well find ourselves in the position of peacemaker or mediator between the opposing sides in many a workplace dispute—and in such a role we will certainly be serving others.

To practice Right Action at work we must scrupulously avoid anything even remotely related to stealing for our own personal gain. The less we are involved in anyone else’s taking what was not intended for him, the better off we are as well. So it is beneficial to all to dissuade other workers from stealing from the establishment, “liberating” materials, or otherwise

misappropriating the employer's property. On the other hand, the kammic implications for us in occasionally having to exaggerate a bit at the boss's behest, or to do the firm's accounts in a legally dubious way they have always been done, once in a while, are not so severe because the full responsibility for such occasional acts is not with us. However, we do bear some responsibility in these situations and if the job seems to require chronic dishonesty in speech or action, and this situation cannot be altered by discussion with the employer, then it may be necessary to change jobs. But we have to keep a balanced perspective and not keep running after the perfect work—part of the *dukkha* of the householder's life is the necessity to function in an immoral society while keeping one's own mind clear.

So if we have chosen work which does not involve us in killing, or trading in living beings, or poisons, or in dealing in intoxicants, we are earning a Right Livelihood. And if, while on the job we carefully avoid lying, stealing, and the associated forms of wrong speech and action, we are doing our work and simultaneously practicing *sīla* on the Path.

The *samādi* section of the Path during meditation has effects in the mundane world, for Right Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration will contribute greatly to our success in our career.

Right Effort at work, as elsewhere, must be neither over-exertion nor laziness, but a Middle Path. For a businessman to spend all his waking hours involved in the concerns of his firm means that he is consumed with some strong *taṇhā* either for making money or for some particular set of circumstances to come about, and this is in direct contradiction with living the Dhamma life. On the other hand, the employee who sees how inane his work is, or how absurd it is to put two pieces into a car on an assembly line for eight hours a day, or that his job just helps people keep revolving in *dukkha*, and so sits back and does only the barest minimum required of him, means to be overcome by defilement of sloth and torpor, and probably ill-will as well. Right Effort at work means doing our best to accomplish the tasks before us—without becoming mindlessly absorbed or involved in them to the point of forgetting equanimity, and without the inertia that comes of a belligerent mind which thinks itself to be superior to the position it is in. Unrelenting effort in the mundane sphere is summarized by the Buddha in a discourse on the householder's life to the lay disciple Dīghajanu (quoted in "Meditation and the Householder" by Ven. Acharya Buddhārakkhita, in *Mahā Bodhi*, January 1976):

"By whatsoever activity a householder earns his living, whether by farming, by trading, by rearing cattle, by archery, by service under the king, or by any other kind of craft, at that he becomes skilful are tireless. He is endowed with the power of discernment as to the proper ways and means; he is able to arrange and carry out duties. This is called the accomplishment of unrelenting effort."

Sammā sati, Right Mindfulness or Awareness, is the next factor of the *samādhī* section of the Path, and there are several ways in which the mindfulness we gain from vipassanā will help us on the job.

"Herein, Dīghajanu, whatsoever wealth a householder is in possession of, obtained by work and zeal, collected by the strength of this arm, by the sweat of his brow, justly acquired by right means, such he guards well by guarding and watching so that kings may not seize it, thieves may not steal it, nor fire burn it, nor water carry it off, nor ill-disposed heirs remove. This is the accomplishment of watchfulness."

The quality of mindfulness mentioned by the Buddha here is not the same as the *sammā-sati* of the Noble Eightfold Path, but this watchfulness is a by-product of mindfulness important to the lay-follower. The more the meditator has developed awareness in the supramundane field, the more careful he will be in all situations of life—meditative, household, or work. If one's mindfulness is not "Right," however, then one will be apt to take this injunction of the Buddha's

as license to indulge in great *upādāna*, that is, in clinging, by all possible means, to what one regards as one's own. This kind of ignorance-based watchfulness will only lead to *dukkha*. What we have to learn to do is care for the possessions we have acquired so that we and our dependents can make best use of them, but without making the error of expecting them to last indefinitely, nor of considering them as a personal possession fully in one's own control. To want only to give away one's hard-earned or inherited goods to anyone who expresses a desire for them is folly. *Dana* or charity can earn us great merit, but only when done in wisdom and when the quality of the recipient also helps to determine how much merit is earned. Material possessions in themselves are not the fetters that keep us in *dukkha*, so having fewer things or more, for that matter, will not necessarily bring more happiness; it is our attachment to them that is the bondage that must be eliminated. So if we apply Right Mindfulness to the proper taking care of our things, we are only intelligently providing for our own welfare and for that of those who are dependent on us, not necessarily generating more *taṇhā* (craving).

Increased awareness or mindfulness is intertwined with improved concentration in enhancing our performance at work. Greater awareness of all the parameters of a situation will enable a businessman to make more accurate decisions, a workman to avoid accidents, and a teacher to really communicate information to his students.

In addition to this mindfulness of external situations, we also have to try to be mindful of our own minds and bodies while we work, as well as the rest of the time, of course. Once we become fairly established in the tradition of *vedanānupassanā* (mindfulness of feelings, as taught in the tradition of Sayaji U Ba Khin), we have acquired a ready technique for keeping mindfulness always with us. Continual change is always going on in our bodies, so at no time can it be said that there are no sensations, since it is the impermanent (*anicca*) nature of the body which causes the sensations. Once we have acquired the skill of feeling these sensations while we are engaged in daily activities, we would do well to keep some degree of awareness of the *anicca* feelings, or of *ānāpāna* (mindfulness of breathing) awake all the time. Then no matter how difficult, or how boring, or how exhausting be the tasks that we are faced with, we will find that we have a relatively equanimous and balanced mind with which to face them, because we will be alternating mind-moments of mindfulness and wisdom, relating to the ultimate nature of our mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*), with the mind-moments that are of necessity fully engaged in the mundane work at hand. Meditators engaged in contemplating the feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), who have practiced the technique for some time, find that this mindfulness of the sensations which are caused by the continual flux that is the nature of the body keeps them in a balanced and detached frame of mind in all kinds of trying situations—and certainly work experiences can sometimes be difficult enough to make it well worth our while to develop the skill of keeping the mindfulness of *anicca* (impermanence) always with us.

Concentration, the last of the *samādhi* section of the Path, obviously is vital to anyone in any task he attempts. The meditator will find that vipassanā has enhanced his one-pointedness and this skill will be applied in all the spheres of life, including work. But he must be sure that even at work this concentration is not rooted in strong craving or ill-will, otherwise the meditator may fall into the trap of squandering pure Dhamma for material gain, by using the enhanced concentration without the other aspects of the Path, *sīla* and *pañña*, to balance it. Naturally, it is always useful to keep one's mind clearly focused on the job at hand—if the mind is constantly running off in various directions toward irrelevant objects, our work will be slowed down and perhaps inadequately completed. As the mind is trained in vipassanā meditation to be detached from, not distracted by, the pleasure and pains of the senses, we will find that when we are working we will have less and less difficulty concentrating on what has to be done at this time and tend to worry less about the past or future. This does not mean that we do not plan our purchases or work schedule or ignore the future implications of decisions taken now. We do all

these kinds of activities; we make all needed choices and decisions, but once such action has been taken, the mind settles back down into the job of the present without being hampered and held back by worries about the past or fears of the future.

An artist or mechanic or craftsman is much better at his creating if his concentration is clear and his mind stays firmly with the materials at hand. A doctor's or lawyer's understanding of his client's situation will be correspondingly increased as his concentration on what the client describes is improved—he cannot practice his profession at all without a fair amount of concentration. Certainly all kinds of teaching and learning depend on one-pointedness of mind. A merchant or farmer or businessman will be much better equipped to solve the difficulties of his work if he can carefully concentrate on all aspects of the problems at hand, distinguish relevant from tangential issues, and sort out appropriate solutions. Concentration is one of the mental factors that is present in any mind-moment, but the degree to which it is developed varies considerably between individuals. A vipassanā meditator generally has a well-developed faculty of concentration due to his mental training and if he puts this ability to appropriate use in the workplace, he will in this way gain mundane benefits from his meditation.

The remaining sections of the Noble Eightfold Path fall into the category of wisdom. *Sammā-ditṭhi*, Right Understanding or Right View, means the ability to see things as they are in their true nature by penetrating through the apparent truth. This means understanding the *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* nature of all phenomena, mental and physical, that is their impermanency, unsatisfactoriness, and egolessness. This understanding should be applied to everyday life—including our work.

Right Understanding (*sammā ditṭhi*) also requires a basic understanding of the Four Noble Truths—of Suffering, its Cause, its Cessation; further, of the Law of Kamma or moral cause and effect, and the Doctrine of Dependent Origination. By means of Right Thought, *sammā-saṅkappa*, the remaining Path-and-Wisdom-factor, one considers all that happens in life with a mind that is free of greed and of hatred. For this discussion of the Noble Eightfold Path in the work situation it is not necessary to separate Right Thought from Right Understanding, as without one the other could not exist in such situations.

To apply wisdom (*pañña*) at work means always trying to keep the mind equanimous and detached while it is engaged in the necessary mundane activities and interaction with other people. So if the boss gets annoyed and shouts at us, we remind ourselves that he is at that moment suffering and generating more suffering for himself. We try to do the right thing if he is pointing out a reasonable fault, and in any case we attempt to send him *mettā* and not let anger arise in reaction to his sparks.

Whenever a businessman or professor or other professional gets so involved in his work that it occupies his mind all the time, keeping it scheming up more plans or “solving problems” without rest or even time for meditation, he is acting on the basis of ignorance, not of wisdom. He has forgotten that all the phenomena he is dealing with are primarily operating according to laws of cause and effect, and that his own will and decisions can only do one part of any job; the remainder is beyond his control.

One is not seeing *anattā*, the egoless nature of external phenomena if he develops tremendous craving (*taṇhā*) for the results of his work. *Anicca*, change and decay, is inherent in all phenomena, but we often slip into ignorance of this factor and unreasonably try to prolong favourable business conditions or consider our resources infinite or get attached to any particular situation. If we forget the Four Noble Truths at work, especially the First and Second—*dukkha* and *taṇhā* as the cause of *dukkha*—we will be continuing to generate more and more unhappiness for ourselves as our craving grows in intensity. Job situations, especially since they

involve money, are very likely to bring up the strong conditioning for craving we all have from the past, and if this desire is not observed with wisdom, we will be continually digging deeper mental ruts that will inevitably lead to future misery. To avoid this we have to train our minds to see how no situation, however apparently “pleasant” it may seem to be, is actually desirable because: (1) no situation can last, all are *anicca*; (2) the state of craving is itself one of unhappiness; and (3) all craving must lead in the direction of future *dukkha*. And, of course, the opposite situation in which the mind reacts with aversion to the circumstances, be they work-related or otherwise, is precisely the same—both clinging and aversion are *taṇhā*.

If the market for our product is favourable at present, if our superiors are pleased with our work, if we are getting good grades at the university, or if any other pleasant situation arises in the course of our work, we would do well to recall that this situation, too, is unsatisfactory. Pleasant experiences bring *dukkha* because they cannot last forever, and any mind which still has conditioning of *taṇhā* and *avijjā* (ignorance), will try to cling to what it likes, striving to perpetuate the pleasant feelings. If we keep the First and Second Noble Truths in mind when we encounter both happy and unhappy states on the job, our minds will be able to remain detached and calm and perfectly equanimous—the only kind of happiness that can endure—no matter what vicissitudes we have to face. At any moment we may run into material gain or loss, be famous or infamous, receive praise or blame, experience happiness or pain. But if the mind remains free from clinging, if it has seen *dukkha* in all craving, then none of this can really touch us and we are sure of inner peace, no matter what the outer circumstances may be.

Recalling the law of cause and effect, cultivating this aspect of *pañña* at work, is quite important and useful. To create good kamma the mind has to try to remain free of clinging and aversion, so we have to keep a close watch on our reactions if we are not to prolong the misery of *saṃsāra*. We should not, however, expect that just because we have thought of this and are trying to keep ourselves away from *taṇhā* that this freedom will easily come about—this would be forgetting the *anattā* egolessness nature of the mind. Only gradually can we recondition the mind to operate in channels based on wisdom, by reminding ourselves whenever we notice an unwholesome reaction that such actions lead only to *dukkha*, and that nothing at all is worth getting attached to or developing aversion toward. In this way, over a long period of time we will notice how the force of our reactions does diminish. So when our superior yells at us and we in turn get angry, we just note the reaction and the sensations that arise, see their foolishness and as soon as we can, just let go of them. If a business deal is pending, and we are getting more and more tense about it as the days go by, we may not be able to just give up the tension, but if we observe how this particular conditioning of the mind is happening with some part of the mind detached and with the sensations (which will be reflecting the mind-reactions), we are no longer reinforcing the tension *saṅkhāras* and so the next time they arise, they will be weaker. Becoming impatient with the unwholesome tendencies of the mind cannot change them and, in fact, this would be generating more unwholesome tendencies of a slightly different sort. If the aversion to work keeps coming up, never mind; just observe that, too, with the *anicca* sensations, and slowly it will decrease in frequency and intensity.

Pañña can and must be applied in all situations. It may not be as powerfully clear as when we are meditating, but if we neglect it during the part of the day while at work, we are not living by the totality of the Path; and without trying to understand all the situations of life in their ultimate nature, we cannot expect to progress toward the goal of liberation from all suffering.

When we have undertaken the task of removing all the causes of suffering—which is what it means to be a serious vipassanā meditator—we have committed ourselves to a full-time job. To grow in the wisdom that can remove *dukkha* one must at all times try to practice all the aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the Way taught by the Buddha that enables us to find for

ourselves real and lasting peace and happiness. When we are engaged in our mundane work of earning a livelihood, we must be sure to keep our *sīla* (morality) as pure as possible. Vipassanā meditation will have increased our *samādhi* (concentration) and we must be sure that it is Right Concentration we apply on the job, along with balanced Effort. Mindfulness of the true nature of the external experiences and internal phenomena we come into contact with when working must be kept alive. And finally, *pañña*, Right Understanding, and Right Thought must be developed with respect to our relationships with our co-workers, the various conditions at the workplace, and the functioning of our minds while engaged in earning a livelihood.

As we practice the Noble Eightfold Path and live the life of a lay-disciple of the Buddha, meditating while working and living in society, we will find ourselves growing in Dhamma while simultaneously serving all those we come into contact with in some fashion or the other. And just this is the essence of the Dhamma life—to eradicate the causes of one’s own suffering by purifying the mind, and with the mind thus freed of greed, hatred, and ignorance, full of *mettā* and compassion, help others in their own quest for real happiness.

May all beings be peaceful!